

Chapter 03. The Sarvāstivāda Schools and the notion of the Real.

In the process of organizing materials from the scriptures, the pioneers of Abhidharma came to realize that there are similar groups of names always mentioned together. For example, the groups of five mental states like vitarka (conceptions), vicāra (sustained thinking), prīti (joy), sukha (happiness), and ekāgratā (one pointedness), while others seemed to be mentioned in a specific context with a specific function such as vijñāna (consciousness), rāga (desire), and dr̥ṣṭi (view). Some terms can be broken down into components, examples, pudgala, vedanā and so forth.

The Abhidharmika-s gradually came to develop the notion of dharma-s – the building blocks of the universe. Sarvāstivādins came to define a dharma as a real entity (dravyantara) that has its own specific nature (svabhāva) or a special characteristics (svalaksana) perceived as its unique function not shared by other dharmas.

When a person is reduced to dharmas and each dharma has only moment existence, there is a problem how to explain the uninterrupted continuity. This problem leads people to Pudgalavāda. Pudgalavāda admitted that besides the changing dharmas there is an un-changed person, the *pudgala*. The authority of Theravāda rejects Pudgalavāda. As result of this controversy, they define dharmas as *paramatha* which is also known as two levels of reality:

- what is not analyzable is paramārtha;
- what is analyzable is *paññatti*.

Another controversy related to the Sarvāstivāda is the concept of time. Sarvāstivāda rejects the idea of *pudgala* but they hold the theory of tri-temporal existence in order to explain the continuity of existence. For them, dharmas exist in three period of time: past, present and future. In Sarvāstivādins ideology, even though a dharma may go through temporal changes and enters into the past, present or future modes, its svabhāva never changes. This is the famous theory of sarvāstitva. The controversy appears during the time of Emperor Aśoka by the middle of the 3rd century B.C.E., when the Sarvāstivāda had already developed into a distinct school according to Vasumitra's Samayabhedoparacaṇacakra, a Sarvāstivāda treatise.

Notion of the real/existent

What precisely do the Sarvāstivādins mean when they insist that a dharma which has become past or one which has not yet arisen in the present is real/existent?

The mark of an existent/real consists of its being capable of serving as an object generating consciousness/cognition (buddhi). Anything that can generate cognition is real. Even imagination is real in a conventional sense. When someone sees a ghost, is it real? There may or may not be a ghost though there may be an object that generates awareness there is a ghost. You won't have buddhi unless something is there. There can be no cognition without an object. The conceptualised (something unreal) is always based on the real. The Sarvāstivādins will say, "you can't have a snake without having the rope there first, though the object is unreal but it is based on the real. If you have an illusion, it is based on something real".

An existent can be conventional/conceptual/relative or absolute. For example, the five skandhas are absolute existence. A person is a conventional existence conceptualised on these real skandhas. An objective entity having a unique form established by its intrinsic nature, whose distinctive characteristics is observed by an error free observation of dharma is said to be a real existence.

There are five kinds of existence

What exist in name only, examples are a unihorn, tortoise hair.

What exist as real entity, example is the svabhāva (self nature).

What exist conventionally, examples are flowers, house, vehicles, forest etc.

What exist as an assemblage – pudgala of the five skandhas

What exist relatively, example of a long thing (exist relatively) to a short thing.

On account of the fact of causality, and of defilement and freedom from defilement, their essential natures being not unreal, they are said to exist truly, [but] not in the same manner that the present [dharma-s] are said to exist truly: The past and the future are not absolute non-existents like a unihorn, an empty flower, etc., nor are they merely relative existents like a vase, a garment, an army, a forest, a chariot, a room, a pudgala, etc., nor are they real existents in the manner of the present. Why? Neither absolute non-existents like a unihorn or an empty flower, etc., nor relative existents like a vase, a garment, an army, a forest, a chariot, a room, a pudgala, etc., can be said to have the nature of causality, etc. Moreover, what has ceased and what has not arisen cannot be said to have real existence in the same manner as the present.

Therefore the “all exists” (sarvām āsti) school advocates the doctrines that dharma-s exist in all three periods of time (past, present and future). They exist in their intrinsic nature (svabhāva) even though only the present one has activity. The most notable and representative view of the Sarvāstivāda is that what is real is what abides uniquely in its intrinsic nature: What is real is what has a svabhāva. This also means that what is real or what exists truly is what exists from the highest or ultimate standpoint (paramārtha-sat), as opposed to what exists relatively/conventionally (saṃvṛti-sat).

Having established that dharma-s exist in the three periods of time, the past, present and future, the Sarvāstivādins have to explain how to differentiate and account for our experience of the difference. This problem gives rise to four major theories and each of the four great ācārya of the Sarvāstivādins offers an explanation.

1. The Venerable Dhamatrāta says that there is a change in mode of being (bhāva - anyathātvā).
 2. The Venerable Ghoṣaka says that there is a change in characteristic (laksana - anyathātvā).
 3. The Venerable Vasumitra says that there is a change in the state (avastha-anyathātvā).
 4. The Venerable Buddhadeva says that there is a change in (temporal) relatively (anyathā- anyathātvā).
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1. The advocator of difference in mode of being says that when dharma-s operate in time, they change on account of their modes of being (bhāva) there is no change in substance. Dharma-s from the future mode of existence came into the present mode of existence and became past immediately. They change in their mode but

no change in their intrinsic nature (svabhāva). This is like breaking up a golden vessel to produce another thing. There is a change in shape but not in the colour nature (varṇa-rūpa). Gold is still gold.

2. The advocator of difference in characteristic says that when dharma-s operates in time, they change on account of characteristic (laksana) but there is no change in substance. A dharma in each of the temporal periods has three temporal characteristics. When one temporal characteristic is conjoined, the other two are severed. (There are three characteristics in dharma-s, past, present and future. Although they arise together, one is dominant, either past, present or future, no change in intrinsic nature). Example, this is like the case of a man who is attached to one particular woman but he is not said to be detached from the other woman.
3. The advocator of difference in state says that when dharma-s operates in time, they change on account of state (avasthā); there is no change in substance. (While there is a change in the positions into which it is moved, there is no change in its substance). This is like the case of moving a token into different positions. When placed in the position of one, it signifies as one, placed in ten, it signifies as ten, placed in the position of hundreds, it is signifies as hundreds. (Similarly when dharma-s pass through the three temporal states they acquire three different names, they do not change in substance. In this theory proposed by the masters, there is no confusion as regards to substance; for the three periods are differentiated on the basis of kāritra (activity) – whether or not dharma has activity. When dharma is not exercising its activity, it is future dharma. When dharma has already exercised its activity, it is past dharma.
4. The advocator of difference in (temporal) relatively says that when dharma-s operate in time, they are predicted differently (as future, present or past), relative to what precedes and what follows; there is no change in substance (one who is the same woman but different perspective). This is like the case of one who is called a 'daughter' relative to her mother and a 'mother' relative to her daughter. Similarly dharma-s are called "past" relative to the succeeding ones, future to the preceding ones, present relative to both.

In these theories proposed by the masters, there is no confusion with regards to substance, for the three periods of time are differentiated on the basis of kāritra (activity) – whether or not dharma has activity. Dharma in the present has activity, when dharma is not exercising its activity, it is future dharma. When dharma has already exercised its activity it is past dharma.

The answer to the questions we raised earlier now emerges more clearly. There is no change in the dharma's svabhāva (intrinsic nature) when it transverse in time. Its integrity is untouched, and the essential nature does not change from being an existent into a non-existent. The svabhāva remains unchanged. It seems to have been a genuine belief on the part of the Sarvāstivādins that sarvām āsti (all exist) was what the Buddha himself taught but it became a problem philosophically when they came to be questioned by their opponents for the exact implications, example the Sautrāntika from the Vibhajyavāda camp who says that only the present exists.

Proof of Sarvāstivāda to justify their arguments.

There are two ways to support – scriptural support and logical reasoning. Buddha has spoken of past, present and future dharma-s in the sutra-s. Very often we see in the sutra-s phrases like “rūpa in the past, rūpa in future, rūpa in the present...” The reality of the past and future dharma-s is spoken of in the scriptures.

Taking rebirth for example: the past kamma has its effect either in the present or future. And the present *kamma* has effect in future as there can be no production of a result without an abiding past deed. That shows, in a certain subtle sense, dharma exist in three periods of time. There is fruit of past karma. All Buddhists accept the universal law of karma.

Another example is memory: memory shows the past kamma exists in a certain form. If past and future dharma-s does not exist, there would be consciousness without an object. Buddha says, ‘conditioned by two (organ and object), there arises consciousness. A perception depends on two things, an object and a base.

Another instance is self-observation. When we observe our mind with our own mind, what happens? According to Buddhist psychology, two units of consciousness cannot arise together. There cannot be two cittas (mind/thoughts) at the same time. The present citta must disappear before the successive citta arises. The present mind can only observe the past mind. If the past mind become some objects of consciousness, which implies that the past exists in some form. Two thoughts cannot be conascent, and a thought or thought concomitant cannot know itself. It is said in the Sūtra that a person can observe the craving in his mind, etc. When one is making the observation, the observing thought and the craving (that is, the thought having the craving) observed cannot be simultaneous, nor can the present thought know itself. The craving observed then must be either past or future. Hence past and future dharma-s must be existent. Karma and its retribution (vipāka) cannot be simultaneous. The fact that a karma which has become past can give rise to its retribution later proves the existence of the former as a past dharma, i.e., an existent in its past mode. The Buddha has taught that consciousness necessarily has an object (ālambana) and since we can have consciousness of what is past and future, past and future dharma-s must be existent.

The study of the human mind is a very important topic, a thought cannot arise by itself. It arises with the citta caittas (thought concomitant), a satellite of other factors affecting the mind. For example, faith is a positive force or hatred which is a negative force in addition to all others. In a situation when thought of faithfulness arises accompanied by other predominating forces, one will be dominant. Faith or hatred. A thought always arise with certain caita so if there is a feeling of faith, one may want to bow down in front of the Buddha statue. This is a unique force and there must have been a background of ideation, such as a Buddha is worthy of faith. Then there is a force of elements conducting the will to worship. The background operating force must have a Buddha. There must be an awareness of mindfulness for the thought to stay on to be mindful. The force of concentration is necessary for it to do it correctly. There are forces operating all the time.

Above instances show that past and present exist in some subtle form. Thus, they accept that dharma-s exist in all three periods of time: “*sabham sabhadā atthi*” -- everything (dharma-s) exist in all three times. This is the second controversy, which

is also recorded in *Kathāvatthu*. A dharma can only arise once – as long as it enters into the past mode, it can never arise again.

Theravāda does not accept that there is independent existing, absolute time. Past means the past dharma; present means present dharma; future means future dharma. Independent dharma-s has no time. Those Sthaviravādins who accepted the proposition that dharma-s exist in all three periods of time, seceded from Theravāda and established their separate Nikāya -- Sarvāstivāda *Nikāya*.

Does everything exist in all three periods of time? *Ekaṃsavāda* gives absolute answer “yes” without qualification.

According to Sarvāstivāda, each dharma has two aspects:

1. metaphysical aspect: the dharma nature (*svabhāva*) exists in all three divisions of time. It is non-changing, substantial and permanent.
2. empirical aspect: dharma exists only present.

After the emergence of Sarvāstivāda some of Sarvāstivādins thought that it was not correct to insist that dharma-s exist in all three phases of time. They had to modify this. The leader of this movement is Kāśyapa, who leads this movement to secede from Sarvāstivāda. The followers of Kāśyapa established a new Nikaya -- Kāśyapīyas.

This controversy resulted into two schools: Sarvāstivāda and Kāśyapīyas. Does dharma-s exist all the time? *Ekaṃsavāda* gives absolute answer. Kāśyapīyas gives a qualified answer. Vibhajjavāda gives a qualified answer. Thus, Kāśyapīyas came to be known also as Vibhajjavādins.

It is clearly stated in Abhidharma-kośa that Vibhajjavādins means Kāśyapīyas. This controversial issue of Sarvāstivāda led to the arising of Mahāyāna. Mahāyāna rejects the dharma theory of the Sarvāstivādins.

The authority of Theravāda rejects Sarvāstivāda. Now, there are four schools:

1. The authority of Theravāda
2. Pudgalavāda (Vātsīputīyas)
3. Sarvāstivāda (Ekaṃsavāda)
4. Kāśyapīyas (Vibhajjavāda)

What is the authority of Theravāda standpoint? The present exists, which means the present dharma exists. Dharma-s only exists in present phase of time. It is also Vibhajjavāda's answer. Kāśyapīyas and Theravāda, both of them give the qualified answer. Both of them are called Vibhajjavāda. The Vibhajjavādins, of which the Sautrāntika is a vehement representative, maintain that only the present is real; but the totally unreal past and future objects can also be cognized by consciousness. The so-called past and future are in fact merely designations imposed on the present.

Is Theravāda Vibhajjavāda?

According to the Mahāvamsa, a king asks each Buddhist monk:

kimvād' sammā samm Buddha? – Of what way was the Buddha enlightened one?

The last monk answers: *vibhajjavādi sammā samm Buddha*. Here, the Buddha is Vibhajjavādin. As a result of that, Vibhajjavāda became a synonymous term of Theravāda.

In early Buddhist text you do not only get analysis you find synthesis as well. What is analyzed is further interrelated. Analysis is not the only method of early Buddhist teachings. Again in *Sārattha dīpanī*, a sub-commentary of Vinaya, it says that Buddha is called Vibhajjavādin because Buddha adopted analytical method. And in another sub-commentary of Vinaya, *Vimativinadam*, it says '*Ekamta vibhajya sīla* -- He always follows the analytical method.'

The modern interpretation is that if early Buddhism is analytical, early Buddhism is Vibhajjavāda. Theravāda is Vibhajjavāda, because Theravāda is very rational, analytical and logical.

Buddha says there are four kinds of question:

1. *Ekamsangā karaniya*

A question to which a categorical (unqualified) answer should be given. This categorical answer came to be *Ekamsavāda*. *Ekamsavāda*, in other words, means an unqualified statement, categorical assertion.

2. *Vibhajya-vyā karaniya*

A question to which a qualified (analytical) answer should be given. Such answer is called Vibhajjavāda. A qualified statement, this is opposite to the first one.

3. *Patipucchāvyā karaniya*

A kind of question without direct answer you raise a counter question in order to get clarification of the original question.

In Anguttara Nikaya, when the Buddha was asked whether the soul and consciousness are identical, He did not give direct answer and says: "what do you mean by Soul?" This is to raise a counter question in order to clarify any ambiguities of the original question.

4. *Dhapaniya*

A kind of question that should be set aside without an answer, like the ten unanswered questions, which are meaningless.

According to early Buddhism, Buddha has resorted to all these four kinds of question. He does not only use a single one. Buddha answers questions according to which question is asked. Is Buddha always Vibhajjavāda? No, He did not only use Vibhajjavāda. He gave an answer according to the manner the question arises.

In Subha Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya, you can find a dialogue between Buddha and a young man Subha. Subha asks:

"Lord! Is a layman or recluse who can realize the high attainment?" Buddha says: "Hearing, O, young man, I give an analytical explanation. In this particular context, I do not make really a categorical assertion. Only in this particular context Buddha is Vibhajjavāda. Buddha is not always Vibhajjavāda. He is Vibhajjavāda only related to those questions which require Vibhajjavāda reply. Buddha is Vibhajjavāda dependent on the context of the question therefore we cannot say that Buddha is always Vibhajjavāda?"

From the taxonomy, the Sarvāstivādins began to formulate their understanding of the Buddha's teachings into unique doctrines of their own, offering to the world their worldview – the world is but a dynamic interaction among independent forces (dharma-s). Their doctrines are ways to explain how the various dharma-s are related and how they interact with one another. They claim that unless the ultimate constituents of existence that make up interdependently arising are real, then nothing could be real. Happenings are real in the sense that they have existence, but not permanent substance. So what they attempt to demonstrate is that the ordinary objects of perception are real in so far as they depend on the existence of the basic constituents, and these must be real in order for anything else to be real.

Though very little of their history is now known, there is a sizable literature that represents their views, in particular the Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra which represent their views in great details. In many ways, their doctrines are important for understanding later developments in Buddhist thoughts. Their philosophy is important primarily because the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra developed their views, analyses, and arguments in the process of refuting the Sarvāstivādins claims.

By Hsuan Tsang's periods, many adherents were attested as living throughout India, Pakistan and Central Asia.